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Wine is not Coca-Cola: marketization and taste in alternative food networks

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Abstract

Alternative food networks can circulate not only new meanings and values but, above all, material entities – foods and drinks, which are grown and made through primarily ecological rather than industrial processes, and can be seen as ecologically embedded. A close look at the example of ecologically embedded wines showed that as a result of quality, artisan, and traditional production practices, the characteristics of these wines are uncertain and variable. Their geographical and temporal diversity is a source of value; however, it is also the greatest challenge to the creation of stable market networks. How can ecologically embedded wines be sold when there is no certainty about their qualities? In this article I propose that certainty around qualities is not as crucial an element of transactions as some authors suggest, and I draw on the case study of ecologically embedded wines to extract wider lessons of relevance to marketisation of foods and drinks in alternative food networks. I suggest that an understanding of taste not as a fixed and unchangeable quality of people and things, but as a relational and reflexive activity between eaters and edibles, can offer a way of valuing uncertainty around product characteristics. Through a cultivation of a 'taste for uncertainty' consumers bodies can become enrolled in supporting artisan, quality, and traditional production through their taste buds. Some pitfalls and limitations of this approach are considered in the conclusion.

Keywords: marketization, taste, ecological embeddedness, alternative food networks, uncertainty, wine

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1. Introduction

In June 2010 Valérie Pajotin, director of the French wine trade organisation Anivin France, caused a storm in a wine glass by announcing that the future of French wines lied in "thinking like Coca-Cola".[1] Anivin France was responsible for blaze-trailing a new approach to wine making in France, encouraging lower-end wine producers to stop identifying with the land on which their vines grow, and instead to blend wines of the same grape variety across regions and to sell them under the generic category 'Vins de France'. 'Vins de France' wines would break with the history of identifying wines by *terroirs* of their production and instead identify them by grape variety (Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon etc.). Ms Pajotin argued that "assembling wines in this way ensures a consistency of quality which will retain consumer loyalty by offering a constant taste from 1 January to 31 December (…) It is what happens with consumer brands, such as Coca-Cola."[2]

Comparing wine with Coca Cola may seem bizarre to those used to thinking about wine as the quintessential local comestible. After all, the 'quality turn' (Goodman 2003) in food production and consumption was inspired by and continues to draw on the valorisations developed in the worlds of wine (Barham 2003, Gade 2004, Trubek 2008, Goodman et al 2012), where the term *terroir* has long been utilised to indicate the influence of humans and non-humans alike on wine characteristics. However, while the image of the wine industry may still be the distinguishing connoisseur sipping (or spitting) a meditative Chateau Latour, wine has also become a mass commodity, with production and distribution dominated by the coupling of large producers and retailers (Unwin 1996, Anderson et al 2004). Supermarkets and specialised retail chains wield particular power in wine markets, with Tesco's currently the biggest wine retailer in the world (Brostrom and Brostrom 2009: 33). These mass markets favour particular characteristics of wines over others: large production volume, product stability (resistance to heat and cold, to different storage conditions, to transport), and homogenous taste from one year to the next. New World brand wines such as Gallo and Yellow Leaf are upheld as exemplary products for these markets, leading some commentators to predict a rise of Old World brands of wines blended across geographies and vintages (Payne 2007), such as the 'Vins de France' promoted by Anivin.

At the same time, the world of wine has seen a growing interest in 'artisan' and 'natural' winemaking. Since 2012 the United Kingdom, which is the biggest global importer of wine (Anderson et al 2004), has been hosting wine fairs dedicated to these alternative wine styles (e.g. RAW, Real Wine Fair).[3] Producers who gather under the umbrella terms of 'natural', 'traditional', and 'artisan' winemaking value a return to traditional winemaking practices, ecologically sensitive farming methods (they are often certified organic or biodynamic growers), and a cultivation of distinct flavours in their products. By avoiding modern oenological methods and tools these producers seek to amplify the impact of the local environment on the material qualities of their wines. The resulting wines can be seen as ecologically embedded in the locale of their production. The characteristics of ecologically embedded wines are uncertain, in that they vary from vintage to vintage, can exhibit tastes and scents which experts consider unusual for their region and variety, or present consumers with unexpected materials such as yeasty sediments or crystallised tartrates. The changing and

[1] http://www.decanter.com/news/wine-news/483338/vins-de-france-will-be-like-coca-cola-anivin

[2] http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/france/7850833/Row-over-future-of-French-wine.html

unpredictable material characteristics of ecologically embedded wines discussed in this paper test all actors involved in their circulation, and thus influence the markets through which they travel.

In considering the marketisation of ecologically embedded wines, that is of the transformation of wines from liquids in the cellar into goods available to consumers, I draw on and aim to contribute to the work on the role of product qualities in markets developed by Michel Callon and colleagues (Callon 1998, Callon et al. 2002, Çalişkan and Callon 2009, 2010). Drawing on the example of ecologically embedded wines, I conclude, contra Çalişkan and Callon (2009, 2010) that not all goods have to be rendered completely passive in order to enter into markets. I focus on taste, a central quality for edibles, suggesting there need not be certainty around taste for markets to develop. In the case of ecologically embedded wines the work of taste qualification is never complete, as the characteristics of wines continue to change from year to year and even from bottle to bottle. The uncertainty of taste, understood as a contextual and relational meeting between eater and edible, can be cast as an opportunity for a deepening of one's experience, rather than a challenge to the market transaction. Drawing on the work of Teil and Hennion (2002, Hennion 2007), I explore how some producers of ecologically embedded work to influence the tasting experiences of their clients, encouraging them to develop 'a taste for uncertainty'. This process, while promising, is also difficult, prone to failure, and requires continuous work from the producers.

By engaging with the case of ecologically embedded wines I seek to contribute to current debates about reconnecting consumers and producers through alternative food networks. Particularly, I explore the opportunities a relational view of taste offers to the development of these networks. I suggest that the work of marketisation of alternative or quality foods involves not only strategic positioning (Murdoch et al 2002), trust (Kirwan 2004), and cultural and aesthetic mediation (Murdoch and Miele 2002a, MacDonald 2013), but also the cultivation of consumers' taste as a form of visceral attachment (Hayes and Conroy 2010). Taste is here conceptualised as experientially informed and malleable sensitivity, inseparable from the making of edibility (Roe 2006). I suggest that ecologically embedded products present consumers with particular challenges with regards to edibility due to their variable material characteristics. As a result their marketisation is aided by a cultivation of a 'taste for uncertainty'. I argue that alternative food networks could benefit from recognising uncertainty as a potential value. However, constructing markets around uncertainty would require a challenging realignment of production and distribution practices as well as the eating bodies of consumers. Some opportunities, limitations and pitfalls presented by such an approach are considered in the conclusion.

2. Reconfiguring markets through malleable taste

A number of factors including heightened consumer food and safety concerns (Stassart and Whatmore 2003), institutional attempts at reinvigorating rural areas through food production (Ilbery and Kneafsey 1998), and new culinary and aesthetic valuing of food (Harvey et al 2004, Murdoch and Miele 2002a) have contributed to a widely acknowledged 'quality turn' in food markets (Goodman 2003). New ways of connecting consumers and producers, referred to in literature as alternative food networks (AFNs), have been seen to emerge (Whatmore et al 2003, Goodman 2004), and enter into complex relationships with dominant markets (Sonnino and Marsden 2005, Holloway et al 2007). The issue of 'quality' has been central to these changes in the agro-food sector, particularly for what Watts et al (2005) call 'alternative *food* networks', that is AFNs for which the characteristics of the

food and the methods of its production are key (as opposed to '*alternative* food networks' which are constructed more explicitly around alternative market ideologies; of course there is plenty of overlap between these categories).

The production of alternative or 'quality' edibles is linked with hopes for a number of positive outcomes for makers and eaters alike. The production methods for these products are seen to be generally more ecologically sensitive, thus contributing to the sustainability of agro-natures (Kloppenburg et al 2000, Marsden 2003). It has also been suggested they may deliver benefits in terms of rural development through the diversification of revenue streams in rural areas, and by ensuring fairer wages for producers of food (Renting et al 2003). Their production has also been upheld as a way of diversifying the cultures of food through the circulation of 'typical' flavours, a position most clearly articulated by the Slow Food movement (Murdoch and Miele 2002, MacDonald 2013); Slow Food's 'Ark of Taste' program identifies and supports 'traditional' production systems and products otherwise 'threatened with extinction' (Pietrykowski 2004 : 315). Although it is still not clear how far the 'quality turn' constitutes a paradigm change, and how far it replicates existing power relations (Goodman 2004), the growing number of case studies suggests that 'quality' edibles have become an established element of the food landscape (Goodman, DuPuis and Goodman 2012).

Alternative, artisan and 'quality' foods have been seen as strongly linked with the ecological contexts of their production (Murdoch and Miele 1999, Renting et al 2003). The character of this connection between foods and local natures has been variously theorised as the 'organic properties' of the food-as-commodity (Arce and Marsden 1993), as the metabolic relationship between agro-natures and the eating bodies (Fitzsimmons and Goodman 1998, Murdoch et al. 2000, Stassart and Whatmore 2003), or as ecological embeddedness of foods (Morris and Kirwan 2010, 2011). In this paper I use the term 'ecologically embedded' to describe comestibles whose characteristics express the local socio-environmental conditions of their production (e.g. Vaudour 2002, Paxson 2008, Felder et al. 2012). It could be argued that all food products are ecologically embedded (Penker 2006), in that for all foods mix the natural and the social (Goodman 1999). However, the difference introduced by local ecology can be either amplified or downplayed in the production process. The industrialisation of agro-food production and processing can be seen as a progressive 'outflanking nature' (Murdoch et al. 2000) in reaction to the limitations biology and ecology place on capital accumulation. In contrast, in the making of ecologically embedded foods natural processes are brought back into cultivation and production and become the source of value and benchmarks of quality (Goodman et al. 1987). Thus producers using artisan and traditional production methods embrace and work with, not against, the impacts of local ecological and biological processes on the becoming of their products, often explicitly treasuring the variability this introduces (Paxson 2008). While ecological embeddedness can be further valorised through the stories told about particular foods (Freidberg 2003), its influence can also be discerned in the material characteristics of the product themselves. In contrast to Morris and Kirwan (2010, 2011), I thus see ecological embeddeddness as more than a social construction, as even in the absence of market narratives edibles are capable of expressing the influence of their socio-ecological origins through flavours, textures, temporal evolution etc. I use the term ecological embeddeddness to express this mutually reinforcing relation between certain foods and drinks, their local ecologies, and the socio-cultural practices of their production.

Crucially, the same biological and ecological processes which can be a source of value for ecologically embedded edibles can also be a source of uncertainty and risk for producers and consumers alike (Lamine 2005). While the risks resulting from the exclusion of natural processes from food production have been commented on (e.g. Castree 2003, Stassart and Whatmore 2003), the risks and uncertainties which arise when these non-human influences are brought back in have not attracted as much attention in the context of AFNs, possibly due to the normative assumptions around naturalness of foods as an inherent 'good' in these markets (Murdoch and Miele 1999). While variability around the characteristics and quantities of ecologically embedded foods is recognised by some authors, the influence this may have on the structuring of markets bears closer scrutiny. To consider how lively goods such as some organic wines become tradable, and how they influence the construction of new markets I draw on and aim to contribute to the study of commodities by Michel Callon and colleagues (Callon 1998, Callon et al. 2002, Çalişkan and Callon 2009, 2010). Their work on 'economies of qualities' sees qualification of products as a central concern of all market actors, and as the basis for the structuring of markets. For Callon et al. (2002) the qualities (characteristics) of goods are neither pre-given nor determined, but established in processes of qualification, which can be seen as moments of adjustment between goods and markets. Recognised qualification trials, such as certification schemes, are obligatory passage points for goods which want to participate in the markets these trials constitute. By employing metrics, technologies, laws and other measures (Callon 1998), processes of qualification establish the qualities of a good (what it is like) and at the same time position it within a market (why it is in demand). Çalişkan and Callon (2010) further argue that transactions cannot take place unless there is certainty around product qualities. In order to obtain this certainty, goods need to be 'pacified' (p. 5) and become passive objects of market transactions acted upon by active human agents.[4]

The case of ecologically embedded edibles such as artisan wines suggests that certainty around qualities may not be as crucial an element of markets as Çalişkan and Callon (2010) propose (see also Gregson et al 2012 on recycling). However, how can markets for edibles function if the qualities of the goods travelling through them are uncertain? Previous work has stressed the importance of inter-personal relations, and particularly information and trust, to the marketisation of ecologically embedded products in such contexts as community supported agriculture (O'Hara and Stagl 2001), farmers markets (Kirwan 2004) and organic foods (Zagata and Lostak 2012). It is clear that trust in personal relationships (Sage 2003) or in institutions (Zagata and Lostak 2012, Hermasen Thorsøe and Kjeldsen, forthcoming) plays an important role in maintaining alternative food markets. However, the relationship between trust and the disruption to habitual buying, cooking and eating practices introduced by the variable characteristics of ecologically embedded foods has not so far been examined.[5]

That the variability of ecologically embedded foods has an effect on their markets has been noted in Paxson's work on American artisan cheese (2008, 2012). Paxson shows that working with unpasteurised milk, and processing cheese with the help of locally occurring bacteria, artisan

[4] This elaborates on the idea of the disentanglement of objects as a necessary element of market transactions, discussed at length in a series of exchanges between Callon (2005) and Miller (2002, 2005).

[5] Some work on local food schemes hints at the necessary re-alignment between the bodies of consumers and the characteristics of foods, e.g. Purdue et al 1997. Also, some studies hint at the breaking down of market relations due to uncertainty around qualities (e.g. Sage 2003: 53). However these points have so far not been further developed in AFNs literature.

producers struggle to maintain consistency of taste, and to conform to food safety regulations, thus excluding their products from circulating in many markets. Also Lamine's (2005) research on vegetable box schemes indicates that seasonality creates difficulties for market relations due to the resulting uncertainty about the composition of the vegetable box. Both authors suggest that uncertainty may be accommodated in these markets because qualities such as quantity and flavour are not the only ones being traded. In purchasing artisan cheese 'people are not simply buying a source of nutrition (…) they are buying the adventure and pleasure of taste, the status of connoisseurship, the pride of supporting a local business or the institution of small-scale farming' (Paxson 2012: 154), while in the case of seasonal vegetables, consumers are buying a guarantee of ecological farming methods (Lamine 2005).

Importantly, in both these examples the authors note the work done by producers to make market relations resistant to disruption which arises from uncertainty around product characteristics. By providing recipes, cooking tips, and offering farm visits and opportunities to negotiate with farmers around characteristics of the produce grown, producers of seasonal vegetable boxes seek to influence buying, cooking, and eating practices (Lamine 2005). Similarly artisan cheese producers formally and informally train their customers in tasting cheeses, thus hoping to cultivate regular consumers for their variable goods (Paxson 2012: 155). Producers' efforts are thus directed at facilitating attachment between consumers and goods (Callon et al 2002) by suggesting ways in which these can become part of existing practices, or encouraging the development of new practices, and influencing how the ecologically embedded edibles become food for the consumers (Roe 2006).

A relational view of taste offers additional insight into the re-arrangement of supply and demand in AFNs. Taste is a key characteristic for all edibles as a 'gatekeeper of consumption' (Guthman 2002: 299), and it is of particular importance to 'quality' edibles (Goodman, DuPuis and Goodman 2012 chapter 11). Taste can be seen not as a static property of goods on the one hand, and a pre-determined competence of people on the other, but as an activity which happens between the objects of taste and their consumers. This relational view of taste has been developed by Hennion (2007) and Teil and Hennion (2002) on their work on amateurs ('lovers of') as consumers who approach taste as 'reflexive work performed on one's own attachments' (Hennion 2007: 98). These authors suggest that there is nothing pre-given or natural about taste; rather, taste is both historical and dynamic, a set of existing preferences which is nonetheless always open to modification. Importantly, modifying one's tastes requires both the recognition of existing attachments and sensitivities, and the cultivations of new ones through exposure to new sensations in the company of others with whom experiences can be exchanged (Teil and Hennionn 2002, see also Latour 2004, Lahne and Turbek 2014).

The potential of taste as an activity for re-configuring attachments between consumers, producers, and edibles, and thus for creating new markets, has been identified by a growing number of authors. Murdoch and Miele (2002a, 2002b) suggest that aesthetic work around edibles, including information, packaging, and presentation, can help make explicit the hidden labour of both human and non-humans involved in production, encouraging a relational aesthetic in the event of consumption (see also Probyn (2000), Whatmore and Thorne (1997)). Mol (2009) suggested that critical reflection on these connections can lead to a change in taste preference, so that civic goods (this coffee is produced in a fair way) and hedonic goods (this coffee tastes great) are no longer in tension. Similarly Carolan (2011) suggests that embodied and reflexive involvements with non-mass

produced foods are central to the forging of new sensibilities and appetites which help support their production in the long term. Importantly, the idea of train-able taste is the key tenet of the Slow Food movement, which seeks to mobilise the bodies of consumers in order to support small-scale and traditional food making (Hayes-Conroy and Martin 2010). This is to be achieved by firstly developing an education in taste and smell through exposure to local and regional foodstuffs (Pietrykowski 2004: 311-12), and secondly by enabling members to feel good through such sensations (Hayes-Conroy and Martin 2010).

The view of taste as relational, malleable, and trainable suggests that there is more than one way of matching supply and demand, and the re-aligning of foods and eating bodies has been noted in historical accounts of changing food markets. For example Terrio (1996) commented on how French consumers have been educated by the French chocolate industry to prefer bitter chocolate over sweeter imported varieties, and thus to support indigenous chocolatiers. Nimmo (2010) described the efforts of the early 20th century British milk industry to make it a staple of everyday diet by strengthening regulation and equating milk's nutritious qualities with social mobility. Also Carolan (2011: 33-36) re-interpreted Bruegel's historical account of the rise of canned food in France as a process of overcoming particular culinary habits and introducing new ones, thus 'attuning' the bodies of consumers to the tastes of canned produce.

These theoretical and empirical works suggest that current dominant attunements between consumers bodies and Global Food (Carolan 2011), or Global Wine, are just as constructed and historical as the alternative alignments proposed. This suggests they can be disrupted, and a taste for uncertainty developed. Uncertainty need not close markets down, but may instead be cultivated as a value. In the following sections I look at the struggles around marketisation of ecologically embedded wines to argue that reflexive work around taste can be useful to thinking how AFNs as markets can accommodate the uncertainties characteristic of other ecologically embedded edibles.

3. Situating the research

The data informing this article comes from a year-long ethnographic study of practices and discourses of organic and artisan wine production in northern Italy (2008-2009). The research included interviews with producers, oenologists and viticulturists at twenty wineries in northern and central Italy, and prolonged periods of participant observation at four of these sites. Two sites were chosen for this article to enable in-depth description. The majority of producers interviewed for this research produced wines from organically or biodynamically grown grapes, and self-identified as makers of traditional, artisan, or natural wines. While the exact grape growing and wine production practices varied between wineries, none of the producers used chemical products in their vineyards (apart from sulphur and copper sprays, as recognised by organic food certifications), most used naturally occurring yeast to ferment the grapes (as opposed to adding shop-bought oenological yeasts to the grape must), and all added much lower amounts of the preservative sulphur dioxide to the wines then permitted under EU regulations. The practices employed by these producers were much more restrictive than the ones generally used in modern winemaking, and corresponded to the ideals informing the production of artisan and quality foods. [6]

[6] At the time of research no specific EU-level certification for organic or biodynamic wines existed. Most of the producers interviewed in this research complied with the rules of organic farming as defined by the EC

Winemaking practices which aimed to express the uniqueness of the local ecology made the marketisation (Çalişkan and Callon 2010) of these wines challenging for producers. By restricting the use of mechanical and chemical aids in the vineyards and the wineries, the winemakers allowed the variability and instability introduced by ecological and biological processes to be felt in the quality and quantity of wine produced. In the words of Eric of Rospo winery,

> 'There is a massive difference if we harvest today or a week later. (…) [T]hings change from year to year, and they change quite a lot… We do not do vintage blends to try to maintain a wine line which is always constant, the same, ideal. (…) Wine is not made with four operations, otherwise we all do the same four things, we'd [all] produce the same wine, we'd codify it (…) to suit the consumer; [on the contrary] it is a very wide world, and indefinable.' (12/02/09) [7]

Multiple markets for wines exist, from mass wine markets dominated by large retail chains such as supermarkets and wine wholesalers, through to specialised wine stores and mail order companies, restaurants, hotels, and bars, and finally individual buyers 'at the farm gate' or at a local market. What matters to the marketisation of ecologically embedded wines is how the quality of the wines – their 'goodness' (Heuts and Mol 2013) – is guaranteed in different markets. Mass wine markets depend on certifications such as territorial provenance guarantees to assure buyers that the wine is indeed worth their money. Quality here is equated with biochemical safety, place of production, and, in the most exclusive certifications, with adherence to an accepted taste profile as certified by 'expert tasters'. In other markets this measuring of properties may not play as important a role. When buying from a specialised wine store or at a restaurant, the final consumer may come to depend on the taste of the owner or the sommelier who are expected to have tried and approved the wine in question. Here notions of trust and regard (Kirwan 2004) come into play, and it is the owner/sommelier who acts as the guarantor of the wine's 'goodness'.

In all wine markets, taste is a central quality to be valued and evaluated, and wines are marketised only if they pass the qualification trial of tasting. However, while in some wine markets taste is seen as a set quality, defined once and for all and guaranteed by experts, be they the members of a territorial certification tasting panel, the restaurant sommelier, or the owner of a wine store, other markets allow for 'tasting' to emerge as an activity involving the cosumers. These are the markets which enable drinkers to be reflexive about their taste through an exchange of information and a contextualisation of sensations (Teil and Hennion 2002, Hennion 2007). In such markets, the connection between particular practices of production and the surprising and even unsettling characteristics of ecologically embedded wines can be explored. This may occur through a conversation with a producer at the farmer's market or during a tasting session, or with a trusted wine store owner or restaurant sommelier. As a result, new sensitivities may be cultivated not only in order to create connections between particular sensations and particular production practices (Lahne and Trubek 2014), but in order to develop a taste for uncertainty – to see uncertainty of

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Regulation 2092/91. They were also frequently certified by Italian organic food production bodies such as AIAB and EcoCert. For an insight into the restrictiveness of these certification bodies in comparison to the mainstream wine production, please see Monnier et al. (2008). Importantly, these certifications focus on the exclusion of particular substances, and do not concern themselves with the typicality of flavours.

[7] All companies and persons in this text have been given pseudonyms.

sensation itself as a good or a quality. In the words of Eric, the uncertainty and variability of taste in ecologically embedded wines

> 'is an advantage, because it is a diversifying element, it introduces the factor of curiosity for the consumer. (…) you buy it from different locations, and producers (…) Because (…) we have a variability from year to year, which is in my view a positive thing, because every year the consumer is stimulated to try different things, otherwise you drink Coca-Cola, you know what you drink. On the contrary, you drink wine, and you're not sure what you're drinking, you have to try…' (12/02/09)

In the rest of this article I discuss the examples of two wineries producing ecologically embedded wines. The first case of La Luna winery illustrates the challenges that certification focused wine markets present to ecologically embedded wines. In these markets standardising qualification trials such as territorial certifications act as primary guarantors of wine's taste, and there is little or no opportunity to contextualise taste experiences to encourage reflexivity. By contrast, as in the case of the Arcobaleno winery, direct relationships with key tasters of particular markets (be that an owner of a wine store, a sommelier of a restaurant, or an individual buyer) enable wine producers to act as mediators of the buyers' taste (Teil and Hennion 2002). In such relationships wine producers can challenge the buyer's existing taste attachments (Callon et al. 2002: 205) and encourage a reflexive attitude to taste which values difference and variability over standardisation and homogeneity, thus developing a 'taste for uncertainty' necessary for the marketisation of ecologically embedded wines.

4. Tastes, wines and markets: tales of two wineries

4.1 La Luna: aligning wines to tastes

It is evening time on the 2nd February 2009 and Sebastiano and I are waiting for a visit from Carmino, Sebastiano's professor from the Conegliano School of Oenology, friend and long-standing oenologist of his winery. Sebastiano needs Carmino's expertise to help appease the terroir certification committee which awards the Denominazione di Origine Controllata e Garantita (DOCG) label, and which had refused to certify one of his wines. This is not the first time Sebastiano's wines have been challenged by the DOCG committee. In 2004 a wine whose samples were already circulating at wine fairs and winning Sebastiano both the interest of importers, and prizes from critics, was refused DOCG certification after failing the tasting trial, twice. The orders were piling up, but without the official stamp Sebastiano was not able to export his wines as DOCG certified, which would impact on the market pathways of his wines. It was only after Sebastiano appealed to the Ministry of Agriculture in Rome that the wine was finally recognised.

Sebastiano and his brother have been working their vineyards in the Barolo region since they were children. After inheriting the company from their father they moved away from chemicals and cultivate vines according to the principles of organic agriculture. They also resisted the fashionable strategy of planting 'international' grape varieties such as Merlot and Shiraz, and continued cultivating local vine types: Barolo, Nebbiolo, Barbera, and Dolcetto. Historical continuity is an important element of their winery's story (Freidberg 2003), as is the idea of 'staying true': to the nature of the grapes, the vintage, the soil. As Sebastiano explains,

> 'As a *cantiniere*[8], you can distort the original product (...) So in my opinion, following the organic ideas, you should try not to distort, or distort as little as possible, what the land has given you. (...) In general, we are rather traditionalistic, the three wines that we do follow a very traditional way of production, very little wood [i.e not using new oak casks], rather long fermentations, etc. (…) we make a very classical Barolo, a bit old-style' (28/10/2008)

The ideal of 'not distorting (…) what the land has given you', or of minimal intervention, is a powerful and widespread narrative in the world of winemaking (Black and Ulin 2013). It is related with the concept of *terroir* as a particular conflation of physical endowments (soil, insolation, microclimate) and human activity (choice of vine types, production practices), which the wine producer both reproduces and safeguards through appropriate labour. In the context of organic production, the ideal of minimal intervention further connects with the image of a wine producer as a custodian of a realm which, while thoroughly socially constructed, nonetheless expresses temporal processes and material characteristics which are independent of human intention, a common position amongst organic farmers (Kaltoft 1999, Vos 2000). This independence is seen as a source of value, and the processes and characteristics are seen as in need of protection from the 'pollution' of abstract instrumentalism typical of human activity (Ridder 2007).

Crucially, the ideals such as safeguarding the 'naturalness' of a product, and expressing the particular *terroir* of its production, translate into particular vitivinicultural practices, which in turn have consequences on the material characteristics of the wine. They are not only more or less self-consciously crafted elements of the production story, and so elements of the marketising strategy – they are also normative ideals which do impact on how things are done, and on what kind of wines are made. As a result of the brothers' desire to 'not interfere with the product', the wines produced by La Luna face difficulties in becoming goods in wine markets in which DOCG certification is an important guarantor of quality. The uniqueness of flavour which results from the production practices at the winery is both the source of value, and of problems, for the winery.

For high end Italian wines intended for international markets, such as La Luna's Barolo, national territorial certifications (Denominazione di Origine Controllata DOC, and Denominazione di Origine Controllata e Garantita DOCG, hereafter DOC/G) represent market-defining qualification trials (Callon 2002).[9] The DOC/G certification is composed of three stages: bio-chemical testing, paper trail audit, and, crucially, a tasting panel composed of oenologists who blind-taste samples of all the wines produced within the boundaries of a given DOC/G area. In making their decisions about which wines conform and which do not conform to the expected aromas and flavours, the panel members rely on a tasting protocol which implies pre-existent knowledge of the wines of the region.[10] The

[8] *Cantiniere* – literally 'he who works in the wine cellar', is how wine producers tend to describe themselves in Italy; the English term 'winemaker' is used to refer to oenological experts or 'flying winemakers' as described by Langendijk (2004).

[9] Lower-quality wines are also certified (Vino di Tavola, or Indicazione Geografica Tipica (IGT)); these certifications do not require taste conformity and only guarantee biochemical safety and territorial provenance of the grapes (for IGT).

[10] For example the tasting protocol for the red Monferrato Dolcetto DOC wine states that at the point of consumption the wine should have the following characteristics: colour: red, ruby-like; smell: wine-like, characteristic, pleasant; taste: dry, pleasantly bitter, with a good body, harmonious. (Monferrato denominazione di origine controllata Disciplinare di produzione, 22 Novembre 1994, Art. 6, p. 3 available:

DOC/G certification, composed of regulations, laboratories, and what Çalişkan and Callon (2010) call 'competent individuals', can be seen as a metrological device for the establishing and fixing of qualities of wines, from bio-chemical (the wine is not poisonous), through territorial provenance (it comes from Asti), to the level of taste (it tastes like a Barbera d'Asti).

In spite of the international recognition they received, La Luna's wines tended to have problems passing through the DOC/G tasting panels. According to Carmino, the consultant oenologist, the problem was that Sebastiano's wines were unusual for the region.

> Carmino (on Sebastiano): 'Wine is a thing you need to take your time with... I told [Sebastiano] – why don't you go with me to taste some wines? 'I don't have time.' Ok then. (...) I can see that in companies where people taste together they grow quicker. (...) One must find time to meet others and taste.' (09/02/2009)

The fact that Sebastiano's wines were not similar to other wines of the region may not a problem for consumers, who may appreciate La Luna wines regardless of whether they conform to an expert-defined Barolo flavour profile. For the DOC/G commission though, the establishing of similarity is crucial. As a qualification trial, the DOC/G tasting panel contributes to the establishing of a market as 'a system of differences and similarities, of distinct yet connected categories' (Callon et al 2002: 298). As a market-making mechanism, a DOC/G qualification trial is also a standardising device. And standardisation, Schaeffer (1993) noted, is a double edged sword. On the one hand, 'standardisation' is linked with a pursuit of high quality. It is an effort to create 'standards', meaning industry benchmarks the achievement of which would guarantee an increase in the quality of goods across the market. At the same time, however, 'standardisation' is also a process of standard-ising, that is of making the goods available more uniform. The efforts to achieve quality and the efforts to achieve consistency are linked.

For Sebastiano, this tension was a source of constant frustration. La Luna's annual production did not exceed 50 thousand bottles, and their wine sales depended principally on market relationships with around twenty wine importers in North European countries, USA, and Japan, who would in turn sell the wine through their network of restaurants, bars, wine stores, and individuals. The fact that La Luna's wines were produced according to organic and traditional methods enhanced their desirability, but where the importers were supportive of 'the story', they did not want to deal with the material consequences of ecological embeddeddnes of the wines.

> 'If this Coca-Cola last year was sweeter and this year is more acidic, you don't like it any more. You're used to a standard, and you want a standard product. And wine is not a uniform product for goodness sake! It's not Coca-Cola! (…) People have to be intelligent enough to understand that Barbera 2007 will be different from 2006. You may like it more, or less. But you can't, like a discussion I've had with this Dutch importer of mine – I want wines that are as natural as possible, don't use yeast, don't use that, don't use the other, don't reduce the acidity – yes! But if this wine, you like it less than the one from the previous year, will you buy it all the same? If you tell me that you'll buy it all

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http://www.viniastimonferrato.it/fileadmin/user_upload/disciplinari/MONFERRATO%20-%20DISCIPLINARE%20DI%20PRODUZIONE%20ok.pdf, accessed 19/08/2013, author's translation).

> the same, I am happy, it one less problem! But if you come and tell me this one is different from than other one – damn!' (Sebastiano, La Luna, 09/02/2009)

La Luna's brothers had little opportunity to interact directly with the consumers of their wines in their distant German, Dutch, or Danish locations, and so their efforts at contextualising the taste experiences centred on the importers themselves. However these attempts had only local and short-lived impacts, and as a result the internationally recognised DOC/G certification continued to play the key role in guaranteeing the quality of La Luna's wines.

Back at the tasting room, Carmino finishes assessing the wine which had failed to pass the DOC/G hurdle. Nothing wrong there, he says. Just the usual animal (sulphuric) smell their wines normally have. Carmino crumbles a tiny bit of copper into the glass, mixes it well, and passes the wine to me. The aroma seems to have become much cleaner. Re-filter both wines, he advises Sebastiano, add a quantity of copper, re-submit, and you'll be fine. While La Luna brothers resist internalising the qualification trials of the DOC/G commission by changing their production practices, with Carmino's help they can make minor changes *post factum* to ensure they pass, eventually, the tasting panel's criteria. In resisting standardisation, the brothers valorise their unique approach to winemaking, and their unique *terroir*; at the same time, however, they make their entry into certification-focused wine markets more risk-laden.

4.2 Arcobaleno: Cultivating the 'taste for uncertainty'

In contrast to La Luna, the owners of the Arcobaleno winery had structured their wine market around working directly on consumers' tastes. This had enabled them to cultivate a reflexivity and openness around taste necessary for the marketisation of their highly unusual and vintage sensitive products. The wines produced by Vasco and Patrizia were fermented with the yeast naturally present in their vineyards and the winery, very low levels of sulphur dioxide were added, and the wines were not refined either chemically or mechanically. The resulting variability of flavour from one vintage to the next was valorised, and communicated to the buyers through an unusual system of wine labelling. At Arcobaleno labels did not correspond to grape varieties or wine 'styles', but express the producers' opinion on the quality of the product.

> Patrizia: 'We have five labels, of wine, which go in order: green, yellow, red, blue, and black. And we don't carry all the labels each year. Because not doing any strange blends or strange transformations in the *cantina* (…) does not allow us to make all the labels each year. For example in 2002 we only made the yellow label; in 2004 on the other hand we only had the yellow and the red. (…) So our clients have to get used to this lack of continuity' (05/11/2008)

The colour-code system went against the imperative of maintaining a recognisable wine line from one year to the next. Instead of capitalising on existing consumer relationships with a certain wine label, Arcobaleno's buyers were challenged to try new tastes and structures in every vintage. The labelling scheme expressed Patrizia and Vasco's belief that their buyers' palates can be 'educated', and become aligned with the variability of 'naturally produced' wines. The vintage variability, and the resulting exposure to new tastes and structures with every year, Patrizia argued, encourages and produces consumers who like having their curiosity stimulated.

> Patrizia: 'For example when we refuse to acidify a wine, [our oenologist] says: this one you'll have to drink yourselves!, and on the contrary we sell it all, which means that, in the end, direct sales allows us to figure out the taste of the consumer and understand that you can educate people about a different taste, which is a natural taste, that is one year the wine is softer and more delicate, another year it is more acidic and tannic (…) this depends on the year, and you manage to teach people about taste, teaching that not all the vintages can be the same you stimulate curiosity of those who drink to look for this naturalness up to the point of wanting a vintage to be different from the other, so they can identify it.' (05/11/2008)

By being exposed to different wines with every vintage, Patrizia suggested, their clients 'develop a taste' for naturalness, in that they learn to expect difference, not continuity. This is a radically different understanding of consumer taste to that which dominates certification-focused wine markets, where the characteristics of a wine need to conform rather than challenge. In the context of Patrizia's market, taste is understood not as an unchangeable property of consumers, but as a relational process (Teil and Hennion 2002). Consumers' taste is not seen as an ultimate point of reference, because taste is not an immovable unchangeable 'thing', but rather a relational and evolving 'meeting'.

Similarly for Vasco and Patrizia the flavour of their wines is not seen as inherent and determined, but as emergent in the tasting (Teil and Hennion 2002). This allows them to risk the marketisation of wines which would not be allowed on certification-focused markets, such as those wines which harbour a malodorous microorganism: brettanomyces yeast. Arcobaleno's wines are especially prone to brettanomyces infection as they mature for long periods of time in wooden barrels with very little sulphur dioxide to protect them. When brettanomyces is active, it produces sulphuric gases as a by-product of its metabolism giving the wine 'animal' smells. In spite of this, these wines find their way to the market, and are even praised by consumers.

> Patrizia: '(…) for example in 2001 the red label had brettanomyces, we did not sell it on to the distributors, we sold it all in direct sales (...) (Our clients) do not risk: they always try our wines, so there are those who do not note the taste of brettanomyces. (…) the 2001 red label [which was infected], not only no-one ever complained about this wine, it is the one that people like, and people come back to buy it. This means that, on the one hand, not everyone has such a sensitive nose, because it is not a smell that is that clear; we, or for an oenologist, or someone in this line of work it is noticeable, but in general not all feel it' (05/11/2008)

Where in certification-focused markets the presence or absence of brettanomyces would be established in a binary manner (it is present in the wine or it isn't), in direct sales relationships the individual buyer's capacity to sense the activity of brettanomyces is more important. The marketisation of the wine is dependent not on quantifiable presence or absence of brettanomyces, but on its status as a sensed or not-sensed element of taste.

This alternative structuring of market around taste as an activity, rather than as a fixed quality, meant heavy market-making work for Vasco and Patrizia. Unlike La Luna's, their wines were considered by many importers to be too unusual.

> Vasco: 'It took us a very long time to find clients that would appreciate us. Often we go to Millésime Bio [organic and biodynamic produce fair] in France (…) we saw many people come to us and try the wine, and go away without, I mean wine importers, you could use some buyers, and you can see that they're not sure that their clients will accept this kind of wine – perhaps they like it, because they are bored with the hundred wines that tasted all the same (…) but that [kind] is easier to sell, so they stick to it.' (25/02/2009)

Instead, the company depended heavily on direct sales, and a half of their entire production (around two and a half thousand bottles) was sold directly through existing personal networks, face-to-face at farmers' markets and wine fairs in Italy, Germany and France, and 'at the farm gate'. Some of their wines could also be found in specialised wine shops, where Patrizia would organise tasting events. Their sales strategy recognised that there is more to taste then just the wine; taste emerges from a complex set of relations, and cultivating one's taste requires reflexivity about these relations. Patrizia would seek to cultivate this reflexivity in her clients, acting as a knowledgeable mediator bringing the world of experience up to the awareness of the taster, so that they in turn could consciously recognise and position themselves with regards to the elements of the experience.

> Patrizia: 'It happened to me in Florence, there was our client present who is a sommelier (...) who got used to drinking the 1998 [vintage]. When I presented him with 1999 (...) he tried it in the piazza, like he did originally with the 1998, at the market, and he said – ah, but the 1998 [was better]! Why, because he had the '98 at home, and he drank it at home with his food, so he had the right combination, and appreciated it in the right way. So, I said – I was expecting this answer. Here is the 1998, let's try it in the same conditions. When he tried it in the piazza he said – you're right.' (25/02/2009)

As Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy (2010) note, 'differences in the feel of food result from the heterogenous ways in which memories, ideas, discourses, moods, tastes, and so forth come together in the body' (2966). As a knowledgeable taster, Patrizia could act as a mediator of her customer's taste and help them reflect on the importance of the situation (the piazza) and the context (lack of food) on their taste experience. Having the customer taste two vintages under the same conditions resulted in them appreciating the taste quality of both.

The point of departure for Arcobaleno was that taste cannot grow on its own; learning to taste requires not only the presence of the object of taste, but also others with whom one can compare and discuss taste experiences. Whether done in the structured setting of a wine tasting course, or informally with a group of friends, or indeed in the company of the producer of your wine in a market place, learning to be affected (Latour 2004) by wine is done through collective experimentation in which one's experiences are set against those of the others (Teil and Hennion 2002). In these experiments, new combinations of objects are tried, and new tastes emerge as a result (Hennion 2007). To enjoy tasting itself, as an activity, 'is not about liking something from what we already know, but about changing our ability to like from the contact with the new thing' (Teil and Hennion 2002: 32). In order to sell their unusual wines, wine producers such as Patrizia have to cultivate this interest in tasting itself as a worthwhile activity amongst their buyers. This taste reflexivity is cast not as a chore, but as a pleasure. 'We must not eat in a distracted way', Patrizia would say, 'to eat and drink in a distracted way is to lose the taste of being alive' (25/09/2009).

5. Conclusion: the promise of taste in alternative food networks

Alternative food networks can circulate not only new meanings and values but, above all, material entities – foods and drinks, which are grown and made through primarily ecological rather than industrial processes, food and drinks which are ecologically embedded. A close look at the example of ecologically embedded wines showed that their characteristics are uncertain and variable. Their geographical and temporal diversity is a source of value; however, it is also the greatest challenge to the creation of stable market networks. How can ecologically embedded wines be sold when there is no certainty about their qualities?

In this article I propose that certainty around qualities is not as crucial an element of transactions as some authors suggest (e.g. Çalişkan and Callon 2010). In many markets guarantees in the form of standards and certifications play a strong role, as the example of La Luna winery illustrated. However, not all markets have to be structured in that way, and uncertainty around qualities can be cast as an opportunity rather than a threat to consumers, as in the case of the Arcobaleno winery discussed. I suggested that this valorisation of uncertainty requires a change of focus from taste as fixed and unchangeable, a certain property of things and capacity of people, to taste as a relational and reflexive activity. In this perspective the link between production and consumption is no longer about satisfying consumers' pre-existent expectations through the manufacturing of particular flavours which are 'in demand', but about introducing new sensations which allow the drinkers and eaters to grow their sensitivity (Latour 2004). This recasting of taste as performance in which eaters can adapt to what they eat offers a way of connecting supply and demand when the qualities of edible products are uncertain. A market structured around an open taste, a taste for uncertainty, depends on the cultivation of consumers who choose ecologically embedded products not *in spite* of their variability, but *because* of it. These consumer-citizens *crave* uncertainty, and through this craving practice ethical of consumption as a form of pleasure (Mol 2009). The taste for uncertainty is a taste for enjoyment.

This vision of markets structured around a taste for uncertainty is hopeful. Drinking and eating are here reimagined as adventures in taste, aesthetic and pleasurable ways of creating relations and experiencing the world. This perspective recalls the re-alignment of taste buds and markets practiced by the Slow Food movement, where tasting is seen as a political act. Slow Food consumers are asked to orient their preferences towards local, seasonal, small-scale and organic food not only so that they can enjoy healthy and diverse food stuffs, but also to enable the survival of local socio-ecologies of food production (Sassatelli and Davolio 2010). However, a taste for uncertainty differs from a taste for Slow Food in important respects. Slow Food identifies particular foods as representative of the socio-ecological tradition of the region, and then attempts to cultivate a taste for these products rather than others. By identifying a particular set of production methods as leading to a particular 'traditional product' Slow Food petrifies variability and can diminish rather than enhance diversity (Lotti 2010). Instead, a taste for uncertainty is a roaming taste which thrives on diversity. It is a taste which supports products which are not standardised, but are changeable and surprising. It is not prescriptive as to the objects of taste, but challenges consumers to exercise reflexivity in their tasting, to assess and value their taste experiences, and experiment with their own ways of making foods and drinks edible so as to support artisan production with their taste buds.

Inarguably, wine is a comfortable good with which to play risky tasting games. It is already positioned as a luxury item, and an object of taste and enjoyment. While it may be regularly

consumed, it is not a staple. The routines and practices which surround wine drinking are also more adaptable to the refashioning of taste as an activity; indeed, there is a rich tradition of wine tasting on which to draw. Should things go wrong – should the openness of taste shut down faced with slimy yeast sediment or the smell of rotten eggs – all that is at risk is at most a bit of social embarrassment. Could uncertainty about taste be similarly welcome in the case of breakfast cereal? Or bread? Or carrots? What effects would uncertainty have on food provisioning and preparation? Clearly for the supply-demand of ecologically embedded edibles to function trust about their basic qualities is necessary – a trust that the food is not poisonous, unhealthy, or adulterated. This trust may require standardisation, but may also be a result of the trust in the relevant seller or organisation (Hermasen Thorsøe and Kjeldsen, forthcoming). Examples from the world of artisan cheese making suggest that conflict between safety and ecological embeddedness is likely to occur, but it is not to say the conflict is un-negotiable (Paxson 2008). Furthermore, recent work on biosecurity proposes that certainty about food safety may never be achievable, suggesting more imaginative and less structured mays of ensuring edibility may need to emerge (Law and Mol 2008, Stuart 2010).Thus a (never complete) certainty around such qualities as safety need not preclude variability, and the resulting diversity of taste experiences.

A taste for uncertainty is open to criticism about exclusivity. Although radically open, it is nonetheless divisive, in that it privileges certain production and consumption practices over others. As a result a taste for uncertainty potentially re-creates divisions between 'correct' and 'incorrect' taste attachments (Guthman 2002), thus creating a new tyranny of quality (Goodman, DuPuis and Goodman 2012 chapter 11). There is no arguing with this, as long as quality, artisan, and traditional foods remain associated with price and access barriers. However existing AFNs show that this need not be the case. For example Italian Solidarity Purchasing Groups and Danish Food Communities bring consumers together to jointly negotiate prices and manage the provisioning of seasonal and organic produce (Grasseni 2014, Hermasen Thorsøe and Kjeldsen, forthcoming). Recognising structural barriers to food access (Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy 2013) should not prevent us from experimenting with opportunities for developing new 'visceral imaginaries' (Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy 2010), that is novel experiences with food which would interrupt existing routines, and to try to cultivate 'good taste' as a positive normative category (Mol 2009: 279).

Furthermore, the relational approach to taste suggests that the purposeful alignment of taste buds with particular production practices is not a strategy employed exclusively in 'elitist' forms of eating, but forms the core of all eating practices (Hennion 2007, Carolan 2011). Developing taste is nothing other than the process of making foods edible (Roe 2006) that is both socially and viscerally appealing, and applies to all practices of eating. The political question, than, becomes who should have the power to structure food education and agro-food systems in such a way that particular alignments become more desirable then others, and what kind of norms should underline this structuring. Most of the agro-food system today is geared towards sustaining the dominance of what Carolan (2011) calls Global Food, characterised by increased centralisation of capital, extractive agriculture, and standardisation of products (Marsden 2003). This includes the aligning of embodied tastes towards the branded products of Global Food which stock the shelves of supermarket chains. A taste for uncertainty can be seen as an attempt to challenge this dominance from the taste buds up. Cultivating an open taste can contribute to the survival and flourishing of more ecologically and socially just ways of producing foods. It is by no means an answer to all the ills of agro-foods, but it should be considered as an important component of a normative change in food markets.

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